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Recent developments in Museum Libraries

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Abstract

Recent developments taking place in the French museum libraries hint at a shift in their administrative status and functions. Aim of this paper is to assess whether this phenomenon can be verified both at a national and international level. Today, it is more widely recognised that libraries cost money and require well trained staff so as spacious premises, factors which may or may not be taken into account in any preliminary financial or architectural programming.

Refurbishment as well as new museum projects provide an excellent basis when it comes to analysing the physical or symbolic “donations” made to libraries in recent years. By examining some of the most recent realisations, we will try to evaluate how a change of image, working conditions and even location may be the result of architectural and interior space design work, in an attempt to marry the wishes of the museum authorities with the needs expressed by the librarians themselves.

On one hand, increasing emphasis is put on libraries and documentation departments in the various services offered by museums to researchers, educators as well as to a broader public, contributing directly to their influence and communication policy particularly on the Internet. The fact that more and more libraries keep their records in computer enables them to provide shared or “virtual” catalogues as well as access to

local or national networks whether specialised or not. On the other hand, museums may decide to “outsource” their libraries, thereby reducing activity and budget to a minimum or even doing away with them completely.

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Like many other libraries, art libraries are doing just what they have long known how best to do, adapting and evolving in a changing world. We are thinking of course about the development of specialised publishing, the promotion of particular readerships, the professionalisation of staff, the acquisition of new skills. Having worked in museums since 1988, I have chosen to discuss here some of the ways in which the place of libraries in museums is being modified and I propose to describe in turn the quality of recent architectural projects for libraries, the rôle of catalogues as integrating elements in networks, and the place of the library in the overall administration of the museum.

The visibility of the museum library

The recent history of museum libraries has seen some important architectural achievements. These are part of the exceptional development seen by museums during the last 25 years, and are illustrated especially in ambitious programmes of construction, enlargement and renovation. As a result libraries are seeing their development assured by well-known architects. The refurbishment of the British Museum's reading room was entrusted to one of today's best known architects, Sir Norman Foster, who has been responsible notably for the Sackler Gallery at the Royal Academy in London, the splendid cupola of the Reichstag in Berlin, and who was the winner of the prestigious Pritzker prize in 1999. The Louvre's small education médiathèque, opened in 1988, was part of the overall creation by the Pei team of the ‘Grand Louvre’; Catherine Bizouard and François Pin, who also worked on the Louvre, designed the médiathèque of the Museum of the Art and History of Judaism; like the rest of the museum, the new resource centre at the Tate is the work of John Miller + Partners, who also created the 20th century gallery at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1993.

Participating in these wide-ranging projects, often given strong political support, the conversion or creation of museum libraries has also been able to benefit from particularly generous budgets, and the quality of the materials used has been to the same high standards as that used for the museums themselves. Financing has been made easier in a number of cases through sponsorship, something which has long been traditional in museums but which is systematically increasing for large extension or renovation projects. The installation of the British Museum's reading room in the Great Court was made possible by a gift from Walter Annenberg, the former United States ambassador in London. This is not an isolated example: the Kreitman Foundation made a gift of £2.2 million for the creation of the library of the Tate Britain, which now bears the name Hyman Kreitman Research Centre.

To design an entire museum project - whether a new creation or a substantial renovation – leads to defining the function of the library within the museum, as a place of research and/or information for the public, be expressed architecturally. In most cases the library is not intended for external visitors but for the museum staff, for researchers and students. However the architect has to find solutions which make it visible from the public areas, because the development of education and research in art history is bringing an increasing number of external readers to these libraries. The device used most often is that of glazed partitions or doors. At the same time the siting of the library must show that it is not part of the normal visitor circulation space and imply a different type of access. The glazed doors are closed, the arrangement of the interior of the library speaks of something distinct from the exhibition halls, and the signage identifying the space often carries the word 'library' and gives the opening hours and possibly also the conditions of access. This solution is what has been chosen for example at Tate Britain and at the Musée Guimet in Paris, as well as in the museums in Grenoble and Strasbourg, and in making its library visible, the museum is declaring itself as a place of study and research. Other parts of the museum, on the other hand, are clearly meant for the public. The designers of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme make it evident that the concept of a médiathèque which is part of the museum's normal public circulation is linked to the whole museographical project, and invites the visitor to enter. At the British Museum, the reading room in the prestigious Great Court announces itself as a place offering the public both orientation and information. The museum thus testifies to its willingness to put at the disposal of visitors means whereby they can enrich their study of objects or topics which have particularly interested them during the course of their visit.

Museum libraries, then, resolve the problems facing them – the exponential growth of published material and of the number of people using them – by profiting from the fashion for grand building projects in museums. The results achieved are extremely satisfying. However we know that these favourable circumstances are unlikely to last, and this makes us look carefully to the future of those libraries which have not yet benefited from the modernisation they require. One of the greatest preoccupations remains the lack of space, which could lead some museums – as was indeed once envisaged at the Victoria & Albert Museum – to move their library off-site, or even to give it a separate existence. These architectural projects often give a more visible place to the library in a museum, and are the result of the museographic dynamism of recent years. And this visibility is also increased outside the museum by the general development of making the library catalogue available on the Internet, thus following the general movement towards automation which libraries of all varieties.

Automation: contributing to subject and local networks

For a very long time the work done in museum libraries has only been visible within the museum itself and only rarely were museum library catalogues published. The automation of museum libraries has given them a completely different audience. Although it began much later in the museum sector than in public or university libraries, computerisation is now very advanced and usually also means that the catalogue is being made available on the museum's website. Many of these automation projects have either been carried out within a network, or have led to one being created. The museum library

has been seen in a different way as a result, no longer as something accessible only within the museum itself but as a part of national, institutional, subject or local networks. North American museum libraries have thus been able to publicise the richness of their collections on networks such as OCLC or, more importantly for art, RLIN. In France the national museum libraries in the field of occidental art are part of a union catalogue which can be consulted on the website of the Ministry of Culture.

Museum libraries have also been able to find their place in art history networks by collaborating with the libraries of universities or institutes. In the Netherlands the Rijksmuseum, the Stedelijk Museum and the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen form part of a shared catalogue of which the Rijksbureau Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) is also a member; in Italy, the library of the Museo dei Uffizzi participates in Iris, the union catalogue of six Florentine libraries which specialise in the history of art, amongst which the Berenson Library at the Villa I Tatti is notable. And the Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte (VKK) at Karlsruhe, a search engine which now allows simultaneous interrogation of 17 libraries, also gives access to the Kunstbibliothek of Berlin, to the library of the museums of Cologne, to those of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg as well as to the Museo dei Uffizzi. The French national museums are hoping to join the VKK during the next few months. The overall result is that the information is now available from anywhere in the world and is one of the ways the museum can show that it is a place of study and research.

Collaboration between the libraries in the history of art is clearly under way, but it is interesting to note that museum libraries, whose staff are sometimes inadequately developed, have been able to hold their own in these technical and costly automation projects. The development which seems to me most interesting at the moment is the inclusion of museum libraries in local networks. In France, the first example was that of Saint-Etienne, where the Brise network allowed the catalogues of the public library, the university library, the library of the School of Art and that of the museum library to be consulted simultaneously. The library of the museum in Grenoble, that of the modern art museum in Strasbourg, and that of the musée de Bretagne at Rennes, can be consulted together with the catalogues of all the libraries run by the town concerned. In the Netherlands, Amsterdamnet and Rotterdamnet allow interrogation of the catalogues of all the town's libraries. The museum thus asserts its place in the documentary provision of the town, even if the access conditions may be different for each institution.

The library's place in the administrative organisation of the museum

In the first two sections of this paper, I stressed the consequences for museum libraries of major construction and redevelopment projects carried out in the museum on the one hand and, on the other, of the general development of automation in their libraries. A third change has been noticeable in recent years: museum libraries see an alteration in their rôle within the system of organisation of the institution they belong to. I feel these changes are a general change of approach occurring in all cultural establishments. The growth in the number of personnel during the last 20 years has led museum management to overhaul their staffing structures, with the intention of making the organisation both clear and functional, constructing balanced teams and reviewing the relationship between the different departments.

The most striking example of this is without doubt the repositioning of the National Art Library. The library, whose origin was in the School of Design established in 1837 at Somerset House, has been housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum in South Kensington since 1857. Since the start of 2002, the National Art Library, which also looks after the museum's archives, has been combined with the Prints, Drawings and Paintings department of the museum to form the Word & Image Department. This decision springs partly from the policy in Great Britain of bringing together libraries and museums: this is seen notably in the fusion of two national commissions, the Library & Information Commission on one hand and the Museums & Galleries Commission on the other, into one body, now called Resource. The way this concept is applied at the Victoria & Albert also embodies the known rôle the library plays as a rich vein of information resources about the entire museum as well as a reference centre for the study of design and the history of the visual arts. This is the more important in that several years ago, as I have already had occasion to say, it had been envisaged that the library might move away from the V&A site. This choice is surely due to a considerable extent to the importance of the collections of the library in the subjects of the history and art of the book: the historical value of its origins and its collection development policy mean that it fulfils a dual mission, on one hand making accessible the documentary collections supporting study and research into the history of art and on the other preserving the objects which make up the history of the book. It thus takes up anew a rôle that has been seen previously elsewhere: from 1924 until 1962 the library of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen was the responsibility of the curator of the department of prints in the museum.

Bringing together the library and the curatorial departments is, in my experience, pretty rare. It may be interpreted as a demonstration of concern on the part of the curators that the library remain as close as possible to their needs. It is probably an argument of the same type as has led to a recent modification in the staffing structure of the Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM) at the Centre Georges-Pompidou in Paris. Since April 2003, the documentation section of the museum, now called the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, and the section which documents the museum's works of art, have been merged into one department, directed by one of the curators of the museum, to whom the head of the library is now responsible. (This post was previously responsible directly to the director of the MNAM.)

Having the library draw closer to the other documentation services within the museum is now a tendency which can be seen in a number of establishments. The linking of libraries and archives can often be seen and is frequently long-established. In France the department of libraries and archives of the national museums was created in 1926. At the Tate, the library and archive were first united administratively in the 1970s, then in the 1990s: they are now housed and made accessible in the same place, the Human Kreitman Research Centre, which was inaugurated in 2002. The department of library and archives of the British Museum, created in April 2001, brings together the Paul Hamlyn Library, conceived as a central reference library for the public, the departmental libraries of the collection departments and also the museum's archives.

The closeness which seems to be imposing itself can probably be explained by the fact that the museum sees a need to group together those things which are the 'non-object', and which demand professional knowledge which is different from that of the management of collections of works of art. Some recent projects have proposed that the

library should be the central point for the joint management of those collections not containing curatorial objects but research tools. This is now the case in the Musée du quai Branly, now being developed in Paris, which is devoted to the civilisations of Africa and Oceania. Its médiathèque will bring together a library formed by uniting the collections of the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens, with a sound library of archives and sound collections originating in the ethnomusicology laboratory of the Musée de l'Homme. A similar arrangement is projected for the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, which will shortly be created at Marseille from the collections of the present Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris. In both cases, one of the reading rooms will be widely open to the public, bearing witness to the museum's keenness to see visitors offered important documentary resources which complement their experience in the museum.

The rapid tour of events we have just made together has allowed us to prove that museum libraries have been well able to integrate themselves into the development which museums themselves have undergone in the last 20 or 30 years. They have modernised the services they offer, they have made themselves available to a much wider public, both on-site and at a distance on the web and they have increased their collaboration with the other departments of the museum. In this they have clearly participated in the same evolution which has been happening to museums. Museum libraries must in the years to come, and in a context which may well be less favourable, decide what balance they need to achieve between their internal role, oriented towards the teams working within the museum, and the services which they offer to the public. This reconsideration is an important element in the museum's purpose, as defined in the statutes of ICOM, which is to be a place which combines study, education and enjoyment.